

My Quest for the Magic Weight Loss Pill - An Undercover Investigation

Buying supplements is risky business. Learn through my experience when I visited a gym and several health food stores pretending to need help losing ten pounds. I hope that after reading this story you can avoid being tricked by common tactics used to promote nutrition misinformation and fraud.

My Quest for the Magic Weight Loss Pill

Author: anonymous student intern

August 2004

"Can I help you find anything?" I feel my cheeks warm slightly as I smile nervously. "Yes. I want to lose around ten pounds and I was wondering what supplements you would recommend." My cheeks burn as I watch the salesperson's eyes slowly examine every inch of my body. Dressed in baggier clothes than normal, I remind myself that I am an undercover investigator. I never realized how embarrassing it was to inquire about weight loss pills. I obediently follow the health food store salesperson to an aisle of bottles and listen carefully as he points to a few supplements. My questions are met with a well-rehearsed speech about the importance of proper diet and exercise, mixed with scientific terminology that would sound foreign to the layperson. Even with my extensive research on the ineffectiveness of the ingredients in the bottle, he is very convincing. He elaborates his speech with a short testimonial of how these supplements have worked for him personally and how the change has been noticeable in his life and in others. "How long would I have to take this in order to lose ten pounds? Do I have to continue taking this supplement in order to maintain my weight loss?" I ask innocently. "After you take this bottle, which is roughly a month's supply, you should have lost those pounds." He catches himself and quickly adds, "Well, every person is different and their body responds differently to the supplements. But one bottle should be sufficient and you should be able to maintain your weight thereafter." For a moment I think about purchasing it. I stare at the orange price tag and quickly return to reality. There is no magic weight loss pill. "How do I know it will work for me? Has this particular supplement been clinically proven?" "Oh yes," he emphatically responds. "We have laboratories that do our clinical research, and it has been scientifically proven. I've seen it work for a lot of the people who have come in the store as well." I felt it would be too fishy if I asked him to site the study and the peer-reviewed journal that it was published in. I began to notice that salespeople throw around the words "clinically proven" and "clinical trials" whenever doubt crosses my face, as though those words alone would convince me. The

salesperson senses my hesitation and begins talking faster, shuffling me to nearby aisles and points to other supplements. My potential questions are buried by the overwhelming amount of information that the salesperson continues to give to me. In his mind, if he can keep me silent, he is successful in convincing me. He provides simple analogies to help me understand what exactly the supplement does in the body. "You see, it works like a traffic cop that directs cars. It will direct your fat from your stomach into a place where it will be burned for energy. Instead of going directly to your stomach or thighs where it will be stored as fat, L-carnitine will direct the fat to be used up." In fact, although L-carnitine is involved in the transport of fatty acids across the mitochondrial membrane for energy production, there is no conclusive evidence that L-carnitine supplementation will improve performance in individuals, including trained athletes. In one health food store, I could sense that the salesperson was a novice in the area of nutritional science. When he would periodically mispronounce the names of various herbs and accidentally refer to an amino acid as an essential fatty acid, I kept a straight face and made a mental note of his inadequate nutritional background. It was only later that I discovered he was a business major and never formally studied nutrition. It is dangerous that such individuals are dispersing important nutritional advice to the public without ever studying the safety and effectiveness of each supplement. To the salespeople, questions suggest uncertainty and doubt. Time passes and they tell me more evidence of why those supplements work, joke around, and try desperately hard to establish some sort of personal relationship with me as a customer. In one store, after almost thirty minutes of listening and barely getting a word in edgewise, I interrupt the salesperson and thank him for his help. He stares at me in disbelief as I walk out of the store empty-handed. I suppose he is usually successful in scamming customers and convincing them to purchase expensive and ineffective weight loss pills. For me, this has been a good lesson in dodging effective sales techniques and I am proud that I have not fallen prey like so many others.

